

## **Background information to Working with Sweet Adelines International to achieve improvements**

Initial email to RMT:

Wellington City Chorus' initial concern.

*We had our Mgmt meeting last night and I was asked to put in writing a couple of things I spoke of on the phone with you, mostly so that it is clear these are views of our Chorus.*

*We perceive a number of threats on the horizon for our chorus and presume these relate to other choruses as well. These include:*

- increase in popularity of acapella groups in recent years, which do not belong to SANZ and which have significantly lower membership fees. We are constantly trying to find new ways to attract members. While we do get people in the door on new members nights, we are increasingly hearing that the costs of being a member are simply prohibitive. This is definitely the case for younger potential members (18-25). Increasingly our older members are finding it difficult to afford the costs too.*
- The news that BHS NZ are considering opening up their membership base to women.*

*Obviously we have no direct control or influence over either of these situations. But clearly the environment/context within which we all now operate has changed significantly in recent years and will continue to change, but we do not see evidence of SAI pro-actively responding to that change. Organisations that do not change will become irrelevant. SAI says we need to work harder to sell the benefits of being SA members - that's really hard to do when the upfront costs are increasingly prohibitive.*

*We understand that none of this is news to any of you. Even so, we want you to ask SAI to look at reducing fees for low/no wage members.*

*Regards,*

*Liz*

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We sent this onto International and Paula Davis replied:

*Dear Elizabeth,*

*Your Region 35 Regional Management Team has forwarded your email and it has reached my attention. It is my honor to respond to you, your concerns and the threats that your chorus are anticipating. While I will take your letter to the International Board at our meeting in March for their review and consideration, I hope to offer some understanding, hope and possible solutions now.*

*These two "threats" that you have brought forth are known and have been discussed by our International Board of Directors. I will try to answer them as best I can at this time:*

*I have had a few conversations with Don Fuson, the almost Past President of BHS, concerning their decision to open up their membership to women. We are quite aware of their decision and the implications it brings to us. While we have some concerns, there are positive points in our favor! As I understand it, women will be allowed to join any chorus that wishes to open their membership to them and they will be allowed to compete with the men at the lower levels of competitions. However, women will not be allowed to compete at the International level.*

*Our International groups have a unique challenge in that BHS has extremely low “dues” for their affiliate memberships (outside North America). However, low dues is not the only reason to join an organization. Consequently, there are very real, excellent reasons and responses to give to those who wonder why they should be a Sweet Adeline:*

- 1. We sing music arranged specifically for women that brings out the best harmonics and unity building possibilities for women. These arrangements are not just men’s arrangements raised to a different key. They actually use different voicing and chords to amplify and personify the uniqueness of women’s voices for greatest success and accomplishment.*
- 2. There is great joy, support, encouragement and “family” in singing with all women. Why do so many women go for “girl’s night out”? We love and need to be with other women for the understanding, relaxation, conversation and on-going support for the ways we experience life. For many who live in a “men’s world”, it’s the perfect place to be ourselves and celebrate being women!*
- 3. Sweet Adelines International has THE best education and educational opportunities that can be found anywhere. The proof of that educational excellence shows up at our regional and International contests - they continue to get better and better, more creative, more professional and all with incredible vocal skills on parade. If you compare our Intl. contest to any other singing groups, both Barbershop and other genres, you will find that the excellent quality of our singers/performances reaches far beyond a top 5 or top 10. Our competitors show outstanding work and vocal skills even in the ranking of 20’s and 30’s!! What other group, organization or television competition can boast that kind of success with non-professional singers?*
- 4. We provide wide, varying and life-changing opportunities for women to grow, learn and improve both their singing and life skills. Of course, we can learn all kinds of incredible vocal skills with many avenues to accomplish each skill. If that is all they desire, we can give that to them with gusto! However, we also offer leadership development, new skill discovery and growth, opportunities to travel and experience the world, friendships with people around the world, and volunteer service opportunities that contribute to bringing greater harmony into their town, region, country and the world.*
- 5. In all singing competitions, Sweet Adelines are judged by highly trained women just like our members: women who compete and experience the highs and lows of competition; women who direct or sing in choruses; women who sing in quartets to entertain and/or compete with various ranges of competitive success; women who pay dues and serve the organization without pay - all just like many members of Sweet Adelines.*
- 6. Sweet Adelines International Board of Directors is made up entirely of women - women just like our members - who listen, understand, and build programing and education for women.*
- 7. Our mission statement - We are a worldwide organization of WOMEN singers....” - with all of the effort women have given over the years to establish ourselves as strong, capable, intelligent and professional, we should celebrate the fact that we are part of such an organization that elevates and values women in everything we do.*

*I could go on, but time is limiting me! While we may think we cannot compete with cheaper dues, BHS does not offer women ANY of these things - elements that are extremely important to many women and that have continued to bring women in and returning for over 70 years now. It is a bit more effort, but you (and all of us!) have a great deal to offer women, even when it costs more. We/women have always been willing to use our money on things that are valuable to us personally. Our job is to help any woman see exactly how and why Sweet Adelines will be so valuable to them.*

*We definitely are in competition with other singing opportunities! Money is a factor, but it is only ONE factor among many that contribute to making decisions.*

*As far as costs for younger members, we do have youth fees for those 25 and under. We offer grants for youth festivals and scholarships for those who wish to pursue music education and vocal pedagogy. I have heard of several choruses that help their younger members with dues/fees for a period of time to bring them in. However, at some point they do have to take responsibility for them. This is an area the International Board discusses regularly. If you have any ideas, we would love to receive them! Often member ideas and contacts bring wonderful ideas that we consider and often adopt. I encourage you and your chorus to be creative and share your ideas and successes with us!*

*Explore new ideas with your RMT and chorus leaders. Look at other organizations in your area for what has worked for them to bring new members in. Then keep a positive and successful outlook! Nothing attracts people more than fun, laughter, positive input and feeling successful! You don't have to be apologetic for our dues - we/you offer a great deal to our members and we need to help everyone (both member and non-member) see the amazing benefits of belonging to this worldwide family of women singers.*

*You can probably tell I love this organization and feel quite passionately about it! While I am the International President, I am also a member just like you - I've sung in chorus for 32 years; I now direct a small chorus of 29 singers; I sing in a quartet that has never won a regional contest; I learn and grow with every rehearsal. I can honestly say that the benefits I've gained from being a Sweet Adeline far outweighs the money, time, effort and/or any competition score I've ever received. Sweet Adelines changes women lives for the better - that's the long and short of it!*

*Elizabeth, I don't want to downplay or ignore your concern. I do, however, want to send you a message of hope and possibility for you and your chorus. The International Board will see a copy of your email and discuss it at our March meeting. Thank you once again for the concern and love that prompted this communication.*

*In Harmony,*

*Paula Davis  
President, Sweet Adelines International*

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We then followed up with Paula after the March meeting.

*Paula, late in 2016, the RMT of Region 35 wrote to you, passing on concerns of one of our Choruses (the email was written by Elizabeth Moncrieff). You sent Elizabeth a response outlining the benefits of being a member of Sweet Adelines. You also said you would put the queries that Elizabeth put forward to the International Board at the March meeting. Her queries were about the possibility of reducing membership fees for certain categories of members.*

*Elizabeth, on behalf of her Chorus, has now asked that this topic be raised at our upcoming RAMM, to be held next month. I am writing to ask whether this topic was indeed discussed at Board level, and whether there were any decisions made that may result in reduced costs for any of our members; or any other decisions that may positively affect our membership.*

*The general topic of costs of membership, and the perceived threats from other musical (including other a cappella groups) continue to exist. Coupled with the cost and time to attend International events, this makes our hobby very expensive in this country. While we all understand the benefits of belonging to Sweet Adelines, I suspect that other, more compelling reasons to join and belong may be required.*

*I would appreciate a response at your earliest convenient please – so that I have everything required for the RAMM discussion.*

*Kind regards*

*Patricia Veen*

*Team Coordinator, Region 35 (New Zealand)*

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*Hi Patricia -*

*Thank you for checking with me again on your concerns about various membership issues including costs, age related membership, etc. The International Board met earlier this month and did, in fact, discuss these and other membership issues that concern your region and other members throughout the organization as well as potential members. While we don't have an answer for this complicated conundrum, I will be putting together a Task Force to do some research into the many types of women we serve and possible membership options. They will then bring their results, observations and recommendations to the Board. This kind of issue is not one that can be taken lightly - it affect members certainly, but it also affects the entire organization - in many ways. So it requires some upfront work and discovery before we can make firm decisions in this and every area we pursue.*

*That Task Force will be set up and begin work by May 1st. While this won't be the quick answer and result that Elizabeth hoped for, her concerns and requests were heard and are being looked into for information and possibilities upon which the Board can make decisions. Usually task forces are asked to complete their assignments within 6 months to a year, after which they will make their final recommendations to the Board. So you can see, it will take time to find and bring these membership developments to fruition.*

*I do understand the pressures of which she speaks. Please let her know that we ARE looking into these concerns and possibilities. Unfortunately, I can't provide a quick or easy answer for you to provide to her or at your RAMM meeting. Perhaps just knowing that we are looking into these possibilities will help calm the "waters" a bit.*

*Thank you for the work you do for your Region and the International organization, Patricia. It's not easy being a leader sometimes! If I can be of any further help to you, please do not hesitate to write again.*

*In Harmony,*

*Paula Davis*

*President, Sweet Adelines International*

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*Dear Paula*

*Thank you for your quick response. I had also planned to suggest a kind of task-force plan within our Region, to come up with ideas and suggestions for SAI as to how things could be improved, in particular from the perspective of a smallish Region, located well outside of the US. There are many things that give pause to members in our Region. Some of these are bigger questions which as you rightly say are not easy to answer or resolve in a short space of time; others are smaller matters that would be resolvable if we all put our heads together.*

*My question now for you is what steps will SAI take, if any, to ensure that Region 35's voice is heard within the task-force you are establishing? What vehicle or format will be provided for us to air our specific member concerns and interests, as well as participate fully in discussions about improvements and generally moving forward as an organisation?*

*These will be the questions that our members will ask at RAMM. While I will be happy to communicate to them that a task-force is being established to look at these matters, I would also like to have something positive to tell them about our Region's ongoing involvement in that process.*

*I look forward to your further response.*

*Patricia Veen*

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*Hi again -*

*I'm certain this Task Force will have to do some sort of survey to get the types of information they need from our members. However, they will also be considering potential members as well. All members would have the opportunity to respond on the survey with their thoughts, concerns and ideas. It could also be that the task force will contact each region for their thoughts/concerns as well. I can certainly make sure they know about your concerns in particular and they may want to talk with the RMT there.*

*We will ask, reach out and take all of your input into consideration - absolutely. We will do that with everyone- we won't however, have open discussions with the entire membership about it. This is a decision that will affect many areas - including the financial ability of both member and the organization to continue to function in providing services and education now and into the future. We do need to do a better job helping our membership understand the use of their dues and the financial implications of declining members and/or lower dues. There are many facets to this discussion that an open forum would not be able to consider to discuss. We will ask, take surveys, communicate and work to understand the concerns - we'll make sure all of our International members are included and equally considered.*

*I hope that will help you in your meeting. I hope you'll let me know how it goes.*

*Paula Davis  
President, Sweet Adelines International*

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We feel comfortable that Paula has taken onboard that we want our voice to be heard and that Region 35 RMT will have input into the Taskforce.